

## CONSUMER EXPERTISE, SACRALIZATION, AND EVENT ATTENDANCE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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*In recent years, performing arts events (e.g., classical or jazz concerts, operas, plays, musicals, and ballets) have witnessed a considerable reduction in attendance. According to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), some of these events have even demonstrated double-digit declines in the last couple of years. However, a recent study by the NEA reveals that consumers who are committed supporters of classical and literary events attend performing arts events at significantly higher rates than others. This suggests that latent consumer expertise among patrons is related to attendance intentions. While past studies have examined consumer expertise or behavioral intentions in diverse contexts such as sporting events and shopping behavior, this paper extends research on consumer expertise and performing arts events to explore why consumer experts form intentions to attend performing arts events. Based on a review of relevant literature streams, three consumer expertise dimensions (cognitive abilities, category enthusiasm, and category knowledge) are delineated. Further, drawing from the theory of planned behavior and sacralization of consumption, a conceptual framework is developed by integrating dimensions of consumer expertise, sacralization, and event attendance intentions.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Performing arts events are service offerings that utilize a primary show experience to simultaneously fulfill the cultural and artistic goals of patrons (Hume and Mort 2007). In societies, performing arts events enrich the cultural fabric of communities, provide stimulating learning experiences to children and youth, foster the development of local theater groups, attract donations and commerce, promote tourism, and support local economies (Caldwell and Woodside 2001; Gainer 1989; Hume and Mort 2007; Kridel 2001). Unfortunately, over the last decade, performing arts events have been experiencing a steady decline in attendance (Boehm 2006). Events such as jazz concerts, classical events, musicals, and plays currently attract fewer patrons than ever before (Boehm 2006; Ng 2009). According to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA 2009), some performing arts events (e.g., classical or jazz concerts, operas,

plays, musicals, and ballets) have even demonstrated double-digit declines in the last couple of years.

Previous researchers have explored some determinants of performing art attendance (e.g., Andreasen and Belk 1980; Hume and Mort 2007). Andreasen and Belk (1980) emphasized characteristics of performing arts consumers and proposed that attitudes, lifestyles, and developmental experiences may influence attendance intentions. More recently, Hume and Mort (2007) focused on the event itself and proposed two important characteristics that impact attendance intentions: show experience quality (e.g., the actors, the show, stage and show performance, show expectations, how stimulating, entertaining, and professional) and peripheral service quality (e.g., access, parking, transport, organization of venue, behavior of staff – ticketing, seating, cloaking, and refreshments). However, research on the mediating processes influencing performing arts attendance intentions is scarce in the consumer behavior and marketing literatures.

Interestingly, the NEA's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) recently indicates that attendance intentions among committed literary readers and classical or jazz listeners are significantly higher compared to others (NEA 2006). This statistic is especially intriguing as it suggests that devoted patrons and supporters, who possess high levels of category expertise, are especially likely to maintain their attendance intentions despite overall decline in attendance trends. While past studies have examined consumer expertise and behavioral intentions in diverse contexts such as sporting events and shopping behavior, this paper extends research on consumer expertise and performing arts events by exploring why consumer experts form intentions to attend performing arts events.

Consumer experts differ from novice consumers in that they possess (1) greater familiarity due to repetitive product-related activities, (2) more developed cognitive structures that are used to differentiate products, (3) better ability to analyze information, (4) enhanced ability to elaborate on given information, and (5) stronger memory recall for product information (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). Although research on expertise has evolved in consumer behavior, psychology, sport psychology, and other fields, there is no consensus on a definition of expertise (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Bettman and Sujan 1987; Hovland 1953; McGuire 1969; Siemens et al., 2008). Extrapolating from existing studies, this paper delineates three dimensions of consumer experts: (1) *category knowledge* (objective knowledge of products and deeper category knowledge structure), (2) *cognitive abilities* (encompassing analytical ability, ability to remember, and cognitive effort as proposed by Alba and Hutchinson 1987) and, (3) *category enthusiasm* (encompassing enduring involvement and need fulfillment as proposed by Bloch 1986).

A major premise of this paper is that consumer experts strengthen attendance intentions with regard to performing arts events through the process of sacralization, which is an intense

form of consumer-product/service relationship. Consumer experts are devoted to their respective categories of interest and create emotionally intense relationships with such categories (Pichler and Hemetsberger 2007; Pimentel and Reynolds 2004). Their passion and devotion toward their category of expertise entail high enduring involvement and need fulfillment, which are critical drivers of sacralization (Belk and Coon 1991; Wallendorf et al. 1988). Although the etymological origins of sacralization are in studies of religion and religiosity, researchers have examined consumers' sacralization of places, times, tangible things, intangibles, persons, and experiences (Acquaviva 1979). For example, MacCannell (1989) developed a framework for 'site sacralization' and explored how travelers engage in the sacralization of travel destinations. In a similar vein, this paper explores how consumer experts sacralize their areas of expertise and, subsequently, the relationship between sacralization and performing arts events attendance.

Drawing from literature streams on performing arts events, predictors of event attendance, consumer expertise, theory of planned behavior, and sacralization of consumption, this paper proposes a theoretical framework for exploring intentions to attend performing arts events by consumer experts. The following sections are organized as follows. First, a review of the literature on predictors of performing arts events is provided. Second, following a brief discussion of research on consumer experts, three key dimensions of consumer expertise are discussed. Third, using the theory of planned behavior as a theoretical foundation, a conceptual framework for understanding how consumer experts in performing arts events form attendance intentions is introduced. The framework proposes that consumer experts in performing arts events are likely to engage in the process of sacralizing their areas of expertise and, hence, demonstrate high intentions to attend performing arts events. Concomitantly, after examining the relevance of sacralization to the current context and the process of sacralization,

testable research propositions are offered. Finally, a summary and implications are provided.

### **PREDICTORS OF EVENT ATTENDANCE**

As defined earlier, performing arts events are those events that provide a show experience while satisfying individual, communal, and cultural goals. In a recent national survey of arts participation (NEA 2009, p.1), the National Endowment for the Arts reveals the following: “For the 12 months ending in May 2008, more than 81 million Americans visited an arts museum or gallery, or attended at least one of the following types of arts events: theater; opera; ballet or other dance; or classical music, jazz, or Latin/salsa concerts. This group composes over 36 percent of the U.S. adult population, and it does not include those who visited an arts or crafts fair or festival, took an architectural tour, or read literature. Yet for most of these individual activities—literary reading is the single exception—participation rates have weakened over the past six years.” Specifically, between the years 2002 and 2008, the study reveals statistically significant declines in attendance in jazz (-28 percent), classical music (-20 percent), opera (-34 percent), non-musical plays (-24 percent), and ballet (-26 percent). Although the strains imposed by worsened economic conditions should be considered as an important factor for attendance declines occurring in the last couple of years, the study disturbingly reveals similar statistically significant declines over twenty six year period ranging from 1982 to 2008. This suggests that, recent economic challenges notwithstanding, other factors have also contributed to the decline of attendance in performing arts events.

Previous scholarly research has addressed performing arts attendance and highlighted major predictors: (1) life-style, (2) attitude, and (3) developmental experiences (Andreasen and Belk 1980). Two consumer life style groups, namely, “socially active” and “cultural patrons,” are posited by Andreasen and Belk (1980) as likely to attend performing arts

events. Socially active consumers are those who regularly attend interaction-oriented events, parties, restaurants, clubs, or other social meetings. Cultural patrons are those consumers that are regularly involved with arts activities, such as, theater, concerts, and other performing arts events. Likewise, the attitudes that are most likely to lead to event attendance are positive attitudes towards theatre and symphony, as well as, positive attitudes towards the arts in general. That is, positive predispositions toward cultural and performing arts events are likely to increase likelihood of event attendance. Finally, the developmental experiences most likely to affect attendance are early exposure to the arts, early education, and parents’ interest in classical music and theatre, urbanism. That is, individuals whose early interest in the arts was carefully nurtured through training and familial encouragement are more likely to sustain their interest on a prolonged basis than others. Importantly, socioeconomic variables such as education, sex, income, and occupation have been discussed as significantly weaker predictors than leisure life style or attitudinal factors (Andreasen and Belk 1980).

More recently, Hume and Mort (2007) expand on research by Andreasen and Belk (1980) and provide emphasis on attributes of the “show” as compared to consumer characteristics. They identify two broad show-related attributes: show experience quality and peripheral service quality. Hume and Mort (2007) propose that peripheral service quality is an important construct in audience development and growth in cultural organizations, while show experience quality and show development are the most important considerations in resource allocation and attendance. That is, while perceptions about the actual show itself (e.g., actors, the show, stage and show performance, show expectations, how stimulating, entertaining, and professional) may stimulate initial interest in attending events, attributes indirectly associated with the show (e.g., access, parking, transport, organization of venue, behavior of staff – ticketing, seating, cloaking, and refreshments) influence lasting

impressions and sustained interest. Both, show experience quality and peripheral service quality are instrumental in the formation of attendees' value perceptions and levels of satisfaction (Hume and Mort 2007).

Complementing the attendance statistics observed in the NEA study discussed earlier and the broad categories of antecedents of event attendance explored in academic research, a different study performed by the NEA's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA, NEA 2006) reveals critical information on attendance intentions. According to the study, classical or jazz listeners are 5.4 times more likely to attend classical or jazz concerts, 3.3 times more likely to attend musicals or plays, 3.5 times more likely to visit art museums, and 1.4 times more likely to watch movies, when compared with non-listeners. Likewise, active literary readers of genre such as plays and poetry are 3.3 times more likely to attend classical or jazz concerts, 3.5 times more likely to attend musicals or plays, 3.7 times more likely to visit art museums, and 1.6 times more likely to watch movies, when compared with non-readers. This study's results suggest that acquired or maintained expertise in performing arts events could foster continued patronage of such events. Although prior research has not specifically addressed attendee and show characteristics with specific emphasis on expert consumers of performing arts events, research on consumer expertise provides some insights on this context.

First, as consumer experts regularly involve themselves with their categories of interest and participate in events where they can affiliate with other enthusiasts (Bloch 1986), they can be expected to possess life-style characteristics similar to those as described by Andreasen and Belk (1980). Second, as consumer experts in performing arts events have exceedingly positive attitudes towards the arts demonstrated through their passion and devotion (Pichler and Hemetsberger 2007; Pimentel and Reynolds 2004), they can be expected to possess positive attitudes towards the arts as described by Andreasen and Belk (1980). Third, as consumer

experts have a number of experiences with a product or service (familiarity) and a long-lasting relationship that stems from development (Alba and Hutchinson 1987), they can be expected to have undergone sufficient cognitive and emotional developmental experiences (Andreasen and Belk 1980). From the perspective of the show experience itself, as experts are more likely to focus on functional attributes than any other product or service features (Jamal and Al-Marri 2007), functional show characteristics could be expected to be most relevant for consumer experts (Hume and Mort 2007). The functional attributes of a performing arts event, such as quality of performance and professionalism, are also discussed as components in Hume and Mort's (2007) description of show experience quality. Peripheral issues, such as parking and behavior of staff, are less likely to initial attendance intentions as consumer experts are mostly concerned with attributes directly related to the quality of the performance (Jamal and Al-Marri 2007).

While the literatures on consumer experts and performing arts events could be integrated to develop perspectives on event attendance by consumer experts, greater elaboration is needed on the defining characteristics of consumer experts and how they form intense relationships with their areas of interest. The next section briefly summarizes relevant literature on consumer experts and outlines three defining characteristics as befitting the context examined in this paper.

### CONSUMER EXPERTISE: THREE COMPONENTS

Despite a rich tradition of studies in the cognitive psychology, sports psychology, and consumer behavior literatures, researchers have generally avoided defining the concept of *expert* and there is no consensus on the dimensions of consumer expertise. Instead, researchers have operationalized the term as befitting their areas of inquiry and focused on studying experts in various fields, including law (Johnson et al. 1984), medicine (Johnson 1981),

and chess (de Groot 1965; Shepherd et al. 2006). Table 1 presents a brief review of studies on expertise from the cognitive psychology, sports psychology, and consumer behavior literatures, identifies the conceptual overlap between expertise and other related constructs (such as high familiarity and knowledge levels), and presents a review of how expertise has been discussed over the years.

Definitions of the term *expertise* have evolved from an emphasis on demonstrated behavior to include cognitive and emotional abilities. In an early study, Hovland (1953) defines expertise based on the communicator's ability to make correct assertions. McGuire (1969) describes expertise based on ability to take the correct stance on an issue while Bettman and Sujan (1987) classify experts as those with extensive prior product experience. In their research on celebrity endorsers, Siemens et al. (2008) make a distinction between professional (the endorser's level of knowledge within a chosen profession) and product expertise (the expertise one has due to experiences with a product).

In their seminal work on product expertise, Alba and Hutchinson (1987, p. 411) define expertise as "the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully." They also propose the following attributes associated with expertise: (1) simple repetition related to cognitive effort, (2) well-developed cognitive structure used to differentiate products, (3) ability to analyze information, (4) ability to elaborate on given information, and (5) ability to remember product information. Since then, other attributes of consumer experts have been extrapolated. These include, an increase in information search prior to purchase (Wirtz and Mattilia 2003), a larger consideration set and decreased loyalty towards specific services in their category of interest (Wirtz and Mattila 2003), the tendency to look at the functional attributes of an entity rather than peripheral attributes like brand name, price, or behavior of sales staff (Jamal and Al-Marri 2007), and an understanding of the direct relationship between product attributes and product

performance (Jamal and Al-Marri 2007). Acknowledging the extant work on consumer expertise, this paper classifies the fragmented research on the dimensions of consumer expertise into three new categories and also emphasizes high levels of enthusiasm maintained by consumer experts. Specifically, three categories, cognitive abilities, category enthusiasm, and category knowledge are discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **Cognitive Abilities**

The dimension of "cognitive abilities" is proposed here as a broad construct that encompasses varied cognitive functions of consumer experts as proposed by Alba and Hutchinson (1987): ability to analyze, ability to remember, and cognitive effort. Familiarity, or the sum of experiences a consumer has with a product or service, is the foundation of or the common denominator for the enhanced cognitive abilities possessed by consumer experts. Firstly, the ability to analyze information is acquired by experts as they become more familiar with products. For instance, Shepherd et al. (2006) point to repeated contact with a product category as the logical prerequisite to analytical processing by experts. Likewise, Brucks (1985) states that analytical processing increases with product familiarity. Secondly, as familiarity increases, the ability to remember product information also increases (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). Jacoby (1983) suggests that previous exposures to a word would impact the ease to which that word would be recognized. Product-related encounters lead to increased familiarity and cognitive structural changes (Jacoby and Brooks 1984). Likewise, Baker et al. (1986) discuss the effects of familiarity on brand name recognition, or the ability to identify the packaging or wording of one product over another product in a visual search. Thirdly, familiarity impacts cognitive effort when consumer experts purchase, use, or otherwise engage in tasks related to the category of their expertise. That is, consumer experts demonstrate cognitive automaticity in that they expend less mental effort and perform tasks

**TABLE 1**  
**Review of Consumer Expertise and Related Constructs**

Source	Context	Construct	Conceptualization	Notes
Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953)	Psychology	Expertise	A person's ability to make accurate assertion	Conceptual
De Groot (1965)	Sports Psychology	Expertise	In a chess context, grandmasters were considered experts	Empirical; Experts evaluate fewer alternatives and tend to analyze strong moves. Novices examine the outcomes of bad moves.
McGuire (1969)	Psychology	Expertise	The ability to take a correct stance on an issue	Conceptual
Chase and Simon (1973)	Sports Psychology	Expertise	Focused on expert vs. novice chess players using the ELO scale	Empirical; Experts recall positions on board better.
Park and Lessig (1981)	Consumer Behavior	Product Familiarity	Focused on objective and subjective knowledge	Empirical; Familiarity affects confidence, category breadth decision time, and use of product dimensions.
Johnson (1981)	Psychology	Expertise	Experts differ from novices in the use of problem solving strategies	Empirical; Experts have more organized memory structure
Beattie (1982)	Consumer Behavior	Expertise; Product Knowledge	Experts isolate important product attributes, evaluate brands and products better based on comparison with ideals, and have complex memory structures.	Conceptual; Experts' complex memory structure enables them to verify similarities and differences to compare brands with ideals.
Johnson and Russo (1984)	Consumer Behavior	Product Familiarity	Familiarity fosters learning and organization of new information	Empirical; Inverted U-shaped relationship between familiarity and learning
Brucks (1985)	Consumer Behavior	Product Familiarity	Focused on objective and subjective knowledge	Conceptual
Sujan (1985)	Consumer Behavior	Consumer Knowledge	Knowledgeable consumers form faster impressions when new information matches category knowledge and use more effortful processing when new information is discrepant from category knowledge	Empirical; Focused on piecemeal-based and category-based processing

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Source	Context	Construct	Conceptualization	Notes
Bloch (1986)	Consumer Behavior	Expertise	Expertise enhances the ability to recall/process information, self image, and control of a person's environment	Conceptual; Enthusiasts possess expertise and seek information, innovativeness, and opinion leadership
Alba and Hutchinson (1987)	Consumer Behavior	Expertise	The ability to perform product-related tasks successfully	Conceptual; Experts possess: (1) simple repetition/cognitive effort, (2) deep cognitive bases (3) analytical ability, (4) ability to elaborate information, and (5) ability to remember product information
Wirtz and Mattila (2003)	Consumer Behavior	Expertise	Experts sort out irrelevant information, focus on salient attributes, and engage in information search more frequently and with greater depth.	Conceptual; High objective knowledge leads to lower risk perceptions and switching cost. High subjective knowledge leads to confidence and less information search.
Shepherd, Gardial, Johnson, and Rentz (2006)	Sales Psychology	Expertise	Acknowledge the lack of a definition on expertise in the cognitive psychology literature	Empirical; Expert salespeople seek personal credibility, prioritize and simplify sales situations, and plan/prepare more for sales calls
Jamal and Al-Marri (2007)	Consumer Behavior	Expertise	Experts have superior ability to learn and discriminate between relevant and irrelevant information. They possess well-developed cognitive structures, better understand product information, and have superior knowledge of alternatives	Conceptual; Experts evaluate functional attributes rather than peripheral ones; They understand the relationship between product attributes and performance
Siemens, Smith, Fisher, and Jensen (2008)	Consumer Behavior	Expertise	Expertise is a dimension of endorser credibility	Empirical; Distinguish endorser's product and professional expertise

more quickly than novice consumers. In general, with increased contact and experience with a particular category, the cognitive processes become automated while processing information about that category and consumer behavior becomes routine unless a stimulus is changed. For example, a change in benefits, costs, attributes, and packaging may cause consumer experts to reevaluate their choice and possibly choose another product in the same category of interest (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). Because all three cognitive processes (ability to remember, ability to analyze, and cognitive effort) are strongly related to

familiarity and number of exposures to a product, they have been grouped here into the category of cognitive abilities.

However, it is important to note that product familiarity does not solely indicate category expertise. Familiarity alone will not convert a novice consumer into an expert consumer (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). There are two reasons for this: (1) although the consumer may have a number of experiences with a specific product, the consumer may not have much experience with the product category as a whole and (2) even if a consumer becomes familiar with a

particular product, he/she may still be lacking category knowledge and category enthusiasm. The consumer expert must not only have familiarity with a particular product/service, but with the category of interest as a whole. Consider, for example, a novice consumer who regularly attends rock concerts. This consumer may not necessarily be enthusiastic about concerts in general, knowledgeable about music, or be involved with the performers. In this case, the consumer is not an expert, only a consumer familiar with concerts. Alba and Hutchinson (1987) refer to this distinction as the difference between expertise and product or service-related experience. That is, having multiple experiences is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for developing expertise.

### Category Enthusiasm

The second dimension of consumer expertise is category enthusiasm. Category enthusiasm is primarily characterized by high levels of product/service involvement (Bloch 1986) and, as with familiarity, is a necessary, but not sufficient characteristic of consumer expertise. In general, the marketing literature (e.g., Johnson and Russo 1984; Moore and Lehman 1980) makes a distinction between category enthusiasts and consumer experts, but here it is argued that product enthusiasm is a component of consumer expertise. Category enthusiasts engage in high levels of information seeking behavior and are highly involved with their categories (Bloch 1986). However, information seeking behavior and category involvement are attributes possessed by consumer experts as well (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). For instance, information seeking behavior can result in high levels of consumer knowledge and lead to the development of expertise (Brucks 1985). Also, because category enthusiasm leads to enhanced evaluation of new product/service information, consumers can develop expertise on how product and service attributes relate to performance (Beattie 1982; Bloch 1986; Jamal and Al-Marri 2007).

In consumer experts, category enthusiasm is reflected in and motivated by high product

usage satisfaction, the fulfillment of mastery needs, the fulfillment of uniqueness needs, and the fulfillment of affiliation needs. Consumer experts, or patrons of the performing arts, are enthusiastic about their category interests and feel intense satisfaction while experiencing such events. Likewise, the fulfillment of mastery and uniqueness needs are satisfied by skill development and achievement, which also engender continued commitment. Enthusiasts might satisfy their uniqueness needs through frequent attendance of lesser known plays or concerts and extensive knowledge of directors and performers. Category enthusiasm is also fueled by the need for affiliation, due to which a consumer often becomes and remains a product enthusiast because of the companionship and group attachment with other enthusiasts of the same product category. Patrons or enthusiasts of performing arts events form attachments to concerts, theatre, etc. to continue their social associations with similar others, membership in fan clubs, and communication with other enthusiasts.

### Category Knowledge

The third component of consumer expertise is category knowledge. Knowledgeable consumers have deeper category structures and richer product information, which lead to the consideration of more alternatives than less knowledgeable consumers (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). All consumer knowledge falls into two categories: objective or subjective. Objective knowledge reflects what is actually known by the consumer. Subjective knowledge refers to consumers' own self-assessment of their knowledge. Expert consumers possess a high level of objective knowledge that allows them to "encode information about new alternatives more efficiently" (Wirtz and Mattila, 2003, p. 23). This high level of category knowledge also allows experts to distinguish between products in the same category easier. They are also better suited to sort out irrelevant information and focus on salient attributes (Wirtz and Mattila 2003) as they engage in information search more frequently and with greater depth. In



general, subjective knowledge increases with the number of product-related experiences a consumer has. However, at times, consumers are overconfident and believe they know more than they actually do (Alba and Hutchinson 2000; Brucks 1985; Wirtz and Mattila 2003). This leads to reduced information search and poorly developed category structures (Wirtz and Mattila 2003). Therefore, although consumer experts must possess high levels of objective knowledge, they do not have to necessarily possess high subjective knowledge.

The consequence of high objective knowledge is that consumer experts may become less loyal to a specific brand and more likely to switch between products or services within their category of interest. Although high objective knowledge may lead to brand switching due to reduced switching costs and risk perceptions (Wirtz and Mattila 2003), consumer experts demonstrate high loyalty once they find a product they like (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). Recent research, however, suggests that consumer experts are more likely to switch between products and services, while still confining their purchase choices to alternatives in their category of interest. This is a consequence of their high levels of objective knowledge and deeper category knowledge structure, which lead to bigger evoked sets.

Knowledge categorization theories discussed in psychology (Medin and Smith 1984; Mervis and Rosch 1981) and in consumer research by (Brucks 1986; Sujun 1985) explain how consumer knowledge is integrated into category structures. Knowledge categorization is “the predominant way of structuring concepts for a particular culture (or subculture)” (Alba and Hutchinson (1987, p.415) and, in a consumer knowledge context, category structures refer specifically to the product knowledge level of consumers. Consumer experts integrate new knowledge based on whether the new information matches their category-based knowledge structures (Sujan 1985). Matches between new knowledge and existing structures support rapid integration of new information using the category-based processing approach.

Discrepancies between new knowledge and existing cognitive structures are evaluated by a piecemeal approach, where consumer experts spend a longer period of time analyzing the information (piece-by-piece) and forming their evaluations.

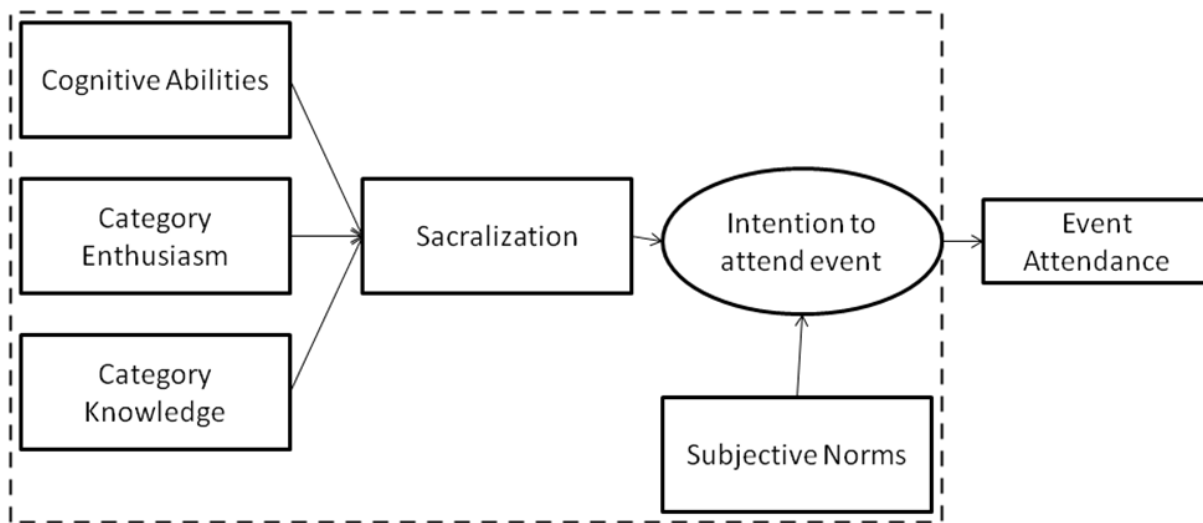
To summarize thus far, three defining characteristics of consumer experts have been identified and discussed: (1) cognitive abilities, (2) category enthusiasm, and (3) category knowledge. For consumer experts, cognitive abilities encompass familiarity driven cognitive processes, category enthusiasm results due to the high involvement, usage satisfaction, and attainment of uniqueness, mastery, and affiliation needs, while category knowledge represents the deeper category knowledge structures and high levels of objective knowledge pertaining to their category of expertise.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework developed in the following sections borrows from existing research on consumer expertise, sacralization, and the theory of planned behavior. The framework (See Figure 1) proposes that consumer experts develop their intentions to attend performance arts events through the sacralization of their category interests. Empirically testable propositions that link the three components of consumer expertise with sacralization are also presented.

The theory of planned behavior states that the immediate antecedent of any behavior is the intention to perform that behavior (Ajzen 1991; Ajzen and Madden 1986). The stronger a person’s intention, the more likely it is that the behavior will be performed (White et al. 2008). Correspondingly, consumers’ intentions to perform a behavior are influenced by their attitudes and subjective norms. Attitudes refer to favorable or unfavorable predispositions, while subjective norms refer to social factors or external pressures. In turn, the determinants of attitudes and subjective norms have underlying belief and affective bases (White et al. 2008).

**FIGURE 1**  
**A Conceptual Framework of Consumer Expertise, Sacralization, and Event Attendance**



\*The focus of this paper will be on the five relationships enclosed in this box

The theory of planned behavior remains one of the accepted attitude-behavior models (Ajzen 1991; Ajzen and Madden 1986). Frameworks based on this theory have been used successfully to predict a wide range of attendance decisions, including the decision to attend health checks or health clinics (Orbell and Hagger 2006), breast cancer screenings (Drossaert, et al. 2005), physical activity classes (Estabrooks and Carron 1999; Lucidi et al. 2006), and workplace health and safety courses (Sheeran and Silverman 2003). In this paper, the postulates of the theory of planned behavior are applied to examine consumer experts' intentions to attend performing arts events. Ajzen and Madden (1986) allow this extension by suggesting that the TPB model applies to all behaviors under individuals' volitional control, as with the attendance of performing arts events by consumer experts. Toward this end, sacralization is discussed as the attitudinal construct that mediates the relationship between consumer expert attributes and event attendance intentions.

### Sacralization

Although discussions on sacralization have appeared in academic studies on religion, theology, psychology, and sociology for decades, researchers are only just exploring the construct's applicability in consumer and marketing settings. Table 2 provides an integrative review of studies on sacralization from varied academic streams, including marketing, identifies synonymous constructs, and briefly discusses varied conceptualizations. While the purpose of the table is not to provide an all-encompassing review, it reveals some broad conceptual similarities and differences with other established marketing and consumer constructs.

Durkheim (1953) defines sacralization as that which is in opposition to the profane. Based on consumption, observation, and belief systems, individuals tend to value their possessions, experiences, interactions, relationships, episodes, places, and objects differently. Drawing from early works on sociology, consumer researchers typically discuss the sacred and the profane as anchoring opposite

ends of a continuum (Belk 1987). In this context, the profane refers to everyday, ordinary, or mundane entities, while the sacred refers to significant, extraordinary, and revered entities. The distinction between sacred and profane entities is subjective in that entities considered sacred to one individual could be profane to another. That is, sacralization is inherently an individual judgment analogous to attitudes. In consumer research, Belk et al. (1989) adapted social science theory on the sacred nature of religion and applied it towards

understanding sacred consumption. Following Belk et al. (1989), sacred consumption is contingent on twelve properties: hierophany, kratophany, opposition to the profane, contamination, sacrifice, commitment, objectification, ritual, myth, mystery, communitas, and ecstasy and flow.

As discussed earlier, among other attributes, consumer experts satisfy their need for distinction developing category expertise and, as Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) suggest,

**TABLE 2**  
**Review of Sacralization**

Source	Context	Construct	Conceptualization	Comments
Durkheim (1915)	Religion	Sacralization	Rituals are the rules of conduct that prescribe personal conduct in the presence of sacred objects	Focused on sacralization as an element of religiosity
Durkheim (1953)	Sociology	Sacralization	The sacred is the opposite of the profane, which is analogous to the mundane	Identified that sacredness has varying degrees
Eliade (1958)	Religion	Sacredness	Sacredness is not manifest to everyone (Hierophany). It is ambivalent in that people are both repulsed by and attracted to it (Kratophany)	Discussed sacredness in the context of religion
Eliade (1959)	Religion	Sacredness	The sacred in opposition to the profane	Discussed sacredness in the context of religion
Nisbet (1966)	Sociology	Sacredness	The sacred has an element of mystery or the unknown	When an object loses mystery, it loses sacredness
Mol (1976)	Religion	Sacralization	Sacralization occurs when entities are represented as objects and assume more importance than their mundane appearance (objectification). It involves giving up something for reinforced connection (sacrifice)	Sacralization is a process not a state. Individuals are emotionally attached to the sacred
MacCannell (1976)	Sociology	Sacralization	Identified five steps in site sacralization: naming, framing and elevating, enshrinement, mechanical reproduction, and social reproduction	Discussed sacralization of sites and places
Acquaviva (1979)	Sociology	Sacralization	Even in highly industrialized societies, virtually anything can become sacred	Conceptual
Hirschman and Holbrook (1982)	Consumer Behavior	Sacred consumption	People consume some objects for the greater derived meaning or experience	Discussed sacred, hedonic, fantasy, and multisensory consumption
Holbrook and Hirschman (1982)	Consumer Behavior	Sacred/ Ecstasy	Ecstasy, like the sacred, can be derived from experiential consumption	Discussed music consumption; fantasies, feelings, and fun

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Source	Context	Construct	Conceptualization	Comments
Mol (1983)	Sociology	Sacralization	Art, sports, music, and secular objects like clothing and cars are sacralized.	Focused on religion and secular objects that are sacralized
Greeley (1985)	Religion	Sacredness	The sacred can detach a person from self in moments of ecstasy	Discussed sacredness in the context of religion
Belk (1987)	Consumer Behavior	Sacralization	When journeys are a search for the self, they can become sacred	Conceptual
Wallendorf and Arnould (1988)	Consumer Behavior	Sacred/Loved objects	Loved objects are important to the identity and give people meaning in their lives	Conceptual similarity with consumer devotion
Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989)	Consumer Behavior	Sacralization	An entity becomes sacred when it is more significant, powerful, and extraordinary than self.	Conceptual; Applicable to: places, times, tangible things, intangibles, persons, and experiences.
Pearce, Morrison, and Moscardo (2003)	Consumer Behavior	Sacralization	Examined site sacralization and apply it to tourism marketing	Focus on site sacralization process
Belk, Ger, and Askegaard (2003)	Consumer Behavior	Consumer Passion	Consumer passion is related to sacralization and devotion; is highly emotional and motivating	Conceptual; While passion and desire are similar, desire lacks commitment
Pimentel and Reynolds (2004)	Sociology/Sports	Sacralization/ devotion	Objects become sacred when they satisfy the need for distinction, the need to belong, or a felt	Addressed consumer devotion as a distinct concept. Sports fans' possessions demonstrate sacred relation-
Ahuvia (2005)	Consumer Behavior	Sacred/ Loved objects	Loved objects affect who and what people are. They enable people to separate themselves from held identities and also identify with conflicting parts of self	Conceptual
Pichler and Hemetsberger (2007)	Consumer Behavior	Sacralization	Products are sacralized to fulfill a need for spirituality.	Discussed emotional bonding in the context of consumer devotion

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Source	Context	Construct	Conceptualization	Comments
Pichler and Hemetsberger (2007)	Consumer Behavior	Sacralization	Products are sacralized to fulfill a need for spirituality.	Discussed emotional bonding in the context of consumer devotion
Chalmers and Arthur (2008)	Consumer Behavior	Sacralization/Lifestyle	Sacred-like lifestyle enacted through objectification, commitment, sacrifice, mystery, ecstasy, and flow	Studied hard-core members of consumption-oriented subcultures
Chung, Beverland, Farrelly, and Quester (2008)	Consumer Behavior	Consumer devotion	Fanaticism is the extraordinary and enthusiastic devotion to consumptive objects	In-depth interviews show fanaticism is associated with addictive and obsessive-compulsive properties
Schindler (2008)	Consumer Behavior	Sacredness	Ritual blessings of animals reveal special and sacred status of the blessing.	Focused on blessings and the spiritual life of consumers
Badrinarayanan and Madhavaram (2008)	Sales/ Marketing	Sacralization of work	Work provides extraordinary experiences and is treated with reverence and devotion	Conceptual

objects become sacred when they satisfy such felt voids. Further, research indicates that the elements of sacrifice, commitment, and objectification are especially relevant for sacralization to occur in consumer experts. Sacrifice involves giving up something to reinforce connection with entities or objects considered sacred (Mol 1976). Consumer experts sacrifice significant amounts of time and other resources in learning about their category of interest and in usage experiences. Sacralization goes beyond mere involvement and encompasses commitment, which refers to emotional and psychological attachment toward entities and objects (Belk et al. 1989). Correspondingly, consumer experts are emotionally attached to their category of interest and their category enthusiasm is deeper than mere involvement. Objectification is the process by which an object takes on more importance than its everyday appearance (Mol 1976). To Belk et al. (1989), objectification is the most important element in learning about contemporary consumption behavior. In consumer experts, objectification is inherent as they derive greater satisfaction from and place more importance on their areas of expertise.

Various entities including places, times, tangible things, intangibles, persons, or experiences can become sacred to individuals (Acquaviva 1979). For instance, frameworks on sacralization have been proposed in the contexts of travel destinations (MacCannell 1989), tourism marketing (Pearce et al. 2003), politics (Bertonneau 2008), people (Joas 2008), culture (Rice 2006), and memory (Misztal 2004). However, sacralization is a process that involves a sequence of steps and occurs in a similar fashion across objects and entities (Belk et al. 1989). Given the precedence for studying the sacralization of cultural experiences and the availability of robust sacralization formation frameworks, MacCannell's (1989) five-step model is extended to the context of sacralization of performing arts event by consumer experts.

MacCannell's (1989) five-step model for sacralization includes: (1) naming, (2) framing and elevating, (3) enshrinement, (4) mechanical reproduction, and (5) social reproduction. In the naming stage, MacCannell (1989) states that for an entity to be sacred it must be named or deemed iconic. This is evident in performing

arts events where plays like, *Oklahoma*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire* are clearly branded and considered iconic. In fact, the play *Death of a Salesman* ran for a record 742 performances on Broadway and the Broadway League describes its impact by noting that its playwright, Arthur Miller, became a household name. In the framing and elevating stage, MacCannell (1989) states that something must be different about an entity that makes it better than its alternatives. The high levels of objective knowledge possessed by consumer experts enable them to frame and elevate performing arts in general and specific events in particular. Patrons of performing arts are also provided with opportunities to frame and elevate through memberships in societies like the Theater Historical Society of America, which is devoted to maintaining theaters. In the enshrinement stage, MacCannell (1989) suggests that a deep personal connection must be established with the entity. Consumer experts in performing arts events are enthusiastic and highly involved to the extent that patrons of the theatre define themselves by their theatre-attendance (Andreasen and Belk 1980). Also, there are thousands of theater fan clubs throughout the country including national clubs like the Broadway Fan Club, where theater patrons discuss playwrights and upcoming productions. In the mechanical reproduction stage, MacCannell (1989) suggests that some form of entity-related physical merchandise must exist. For performing arts events, physical merchandise exists in the form of programs, memorabilia, posters, and t-shirts, among others that are regular fixtures at theatre and concert events. In fact, rare merchandise from Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals and *Bat Boy, The Musical* are being sold on eBay for more than \$250. In the social reproduction stage, MacCannell (1989) discusses the existence of communities that identify with the entity. In the case of theatre, dance, and music, local communities identify strongly with the arts. In the United States alone, there are currently 207 community theater groups and membership has grown steadily since 1912 according to the American Association of Community Theatre 2009. As

the preceding stages are likely to be met by consumer experts possessing category level interest in performing arts events, sacralization is considered as an intervening process for consumer experts as they form behavioral intentions toward attending performing arts events.

### Propositions

As discussed earlier, cognitive abilities in consumer experts are driven by category familiarity and entail the ability to remember, ability to analyze, and reduced cognitive effort. Familiarity implies that the expert consumers' cognitive processes will become automated when processing information about performing arts events. Due to their enhanced category structures, expert consumers are more likely to recognize names and symbols related to performing arts events (Barsalou and Ross 1986) and engage in the naming stage of sacralization of performing arts events. Further, the names of specific plays or events assume higher meanings to experts and patrons of performing arts events perceive such cultural activities superior to other mass entertainment options. As experts critically analyze the performing arts and elevate them based on objective attributes (Wirtz and Mattila 2003), their cognitive abilities support the framing and elevating stage of the sacralization process. Further, once they elevate their attachment with performing arts events, experts' familiarity with their category of interest and derived satisfaction foster deep personal connection or enshrinement. Finally, experts' cognitive abilities are likely to influence choice of merchandise and membership groups that are deemed as offering appropriate functional attributes and opportunities for enhancing involvement and identification. Therefore, as experts' cognitive abilities are likely to facilitate their sacralization of performing arts events, the following proposition is offered:

**P<sub>1</sub>:** Enhanced cognitive abilities possessed by experts in performing arts events are positively related to sacralization.

Further, as discussed earlier, consumer experts are enthusiastic or highly involved with their areas of interest. Experts in performing arts have an established personal connection with and derive great satisfaction from the arts (Andreassen and Belk 1980). Category enthusiasm is relevant for influencing all five stages of MacCannell's (1989) sacralization process as it indicates heightened involvement and information seeking behavior, along with high product usage satisfaction, the fulfillment of mastery needs, the fulfillment of uniqueness needs, and the fulfillment of affiliation needs. These factors influence how performing arts events become iconic, framing and elevating of specific events and the overall category of interest, establishment of deep personal connections, ownership of tangible merchandise, and membership in identification groups. Accordingly, the following proposition is offered:

**P<sub>2</sub>:** Category enthusiasm possessed by experts in performing arts events is positively related to sacralization.

The third component of expertise is the possession of high objective knowledge that leads to increased information search and reflects a greater/elevated interest in the product category. That is, high objective knowledge provides consumer experts with deeper category knowledge and a better ability to discern between alternative choices. With consumer experts in performing arts events, this high objective knowledge enables the recognition and recall of iconic or classic productions, viewing performing arts events as sacred relative to other entertainment alternatives, enshrine performing arts events, better awareness of valued merchandise, and the need to participate in membership groups. Hence, the following proposition is offered:

**P<sub>3</sub>:** Category knowledge possessed by experts in performing arts events is positively related to sacralization.

According to the theory of planned behavior, attitudes are instrumental in influencing behavioral intentions. Sacralization, as conceptualized in this paper, has partial

conceptual overlap with related attitudinal constructs such as fascination and devotion (Belk et al. 2003). Further, attendance intentions have been examined extensively in previous studies employing the theory of planned behavior (e.g., Conner and Norman 1996; Drossaert et al. 2005; Estabrooks and Carron 1999; Lucidi et al. 2006; Orbell and Hagger 2006; Sheeran and Silverman 2003). In a similar vein, sacralization of performing arts events is proposed as an antecedent of event attendance intentions. Hence, the following proposition is offered:

**P<sub>4</sub>:** Sacralization of performing arts events by consumer experts is positively related to event attendance intentions

The theory of planned behavior posits that subjective norms, such as normative social beliefs, exert an influence on behavioral intentions. Although consumer experts in performing arts events are influenced by their own cognitive abilities, category enthusiasm, and category knowledge, it is likely that their event attendance intentions could be affected by the opinions of peers, reference groups, and reviewers. As highlighted earlier, consumer experts in performing arts events often seek membership groups that involve shared affiliations (e.g., Broadway Fan Club) to obtain and exchange relevant information. In addition to these influences, consumer experts' search for objective knowledge about performing arts events may be influenced by external reviewers (Plucker et al. 2009). When consumer experts search for objective attributes of events (Hume and Mort 2007), they are also likely to be influenced by critics or other valued opinion leaders and avoid (or experience) events with negative (or positive) functional attributes (Siemens et al. 2008; Wirtz and Mattila 2003).

**P<sub>5</sub>:** Subjective norms are related to attendance intentions for consumer experts in performing arts events

## CONCLUSION

As the National Endowment for the Arts aptly states, the public's involvement and participation in performing arts events and

activities represent the nation's cultural vitality. However, according to a recently released study (NEA 2009), attendance in performing arts events has been steadily declining since 1982 and more strongly between the years 2002 and 2008. Over the last couple of decades, declining attendance rates have prompted cultural organizations, event societies, national agencies, private bodies, and academic researchers to examine various factors contributing to attendance intentions. However, the NEA's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (NEA 2006) shed further light on performing arts events attendance and revealed that attendance intentions are likely to be substantially higher for experienced consumers, active listeners, and literary readers. That is, consumers with expertise in the performing arts events are likely to patronize such events more actively than novice consumers. Given that past research has not focused on why consumer experts develop attendance intentions with regard to the performing arts, this paper develops a conceptual framework that integrates research on consumer expertise, sacralization of consumption, and intentions to attend performing arts events.

Based on a review of the consumer expertise literature, three important dimensions of consumer expertise are delineated: (1) cognitive abilities (2) category enthusiasm, and (3) category knowledge. Further, the construct of sacralization is adapted and extended to encompass powerful and enduring relationships between consumer experts in performing arts events and their categories of expertise. The process of sacralization is also discussed with specific emphasis on the dimensions of consumer expertise and performing arts events. Drawing on the theory of planned behavior, the conceptual framework developed in this paper proposes that expert attributes influence sacralization, which in turn, influences intentions to attend performing arts events. That is, sacralization is proposed as a critical mediating construct that explains why consumers with elevated experience in performing arts events maintain higher

intentions to attend such events, when compared to novice consumers.

This paper offers several theoretical and managerial implications. From a theoretical standpoint, prior work on consumer expertise and sacralization are chronologically tabulated to offer perspectives on how the constructs have evolved in academic research. Further, extending research on expertise in consumer research and sacralization in psychology and sociology research, this paper integrates both constructs in the context of performing arts events attendance. Mirroring extant research on sacralization of travel sites and other entities, the process of sacralization of performing arts events is also discussed. These contributions could provide insights for further rigorous research in the areas of consumer expertise, sacralization of consumption, and performing arts events. Notably, future researchers could empirically verify the propositions presented in this paper and examine their generalizability across different patron groups and types of performing arts events. Future researchers could also verify whether, as with commitment and involvement, there exist different types of sacralization. It would be especially interesting to examine other antecedents and contingent conditions to sacralization to form, mature, and decline. Finally, researchers must further examine patterns in performing arts events consumption, including frequency of consumption, the effect of the Internet on consumption, consumption as a social and shared phenomenon, and the roles of socioeconomic and generational variables.

From a managerial standpoint, this paper sheds some light on why there exists a difference in performing arts events attendance between consumers with elevated experience and developed knowledge categories versus novice consumers. Sacralization, when examined as a mediating variable, suggests that active and committed patrons of performing arts are more than simply involved with the arts. They share a deep personal connection with the arts, elevate their experiences as extraordinary when compared with other mundane consumption



activities, and integrate the performing arts as an important component of their identities. This perspective implies that promoters and marketers of performing arts events must tailor their advertising and promotional campaigns to appeal to experts' cognitive abilities, category enthusiasm, and category knowledge, while communicating appropriate stimuli that support sacralization. Princeton University's Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies indicates that performing arts events enjoy relatively high attendance in cities like Boston and Cincinnati, while attracting the least patrons in small cities and rural areas. As the presence of financially and managerial robust arts organizations is cited as a reason for this trend, managers of performing arts events in other large cities must examine how these cities enjoy continued success and also attempt to customize events that contribute to the cultural development of the populace in smaller cities. Local university and community theatre groups can learn best practices from more successful organizations and deploy their resources more effectively. The early stages of the sacralization process involve naming, framing, and elevating. Therefore, event organizers in both large and small cities must work on developing brand recognition for their offerings and stage iconic productions that enjoy broad appeals across varied market segments. Given the aging of the baby boomers segment that has been the mainstay of performing arts events consumers, event organizers must strategize unique ways to reach the younger, culturally-diverse, and technologically-savvy consumer segments. Toward this end, the role of social networking sites, networks for educating parents of children and young adults, and Internet membership groups must also be investigated.

In summary, this paper positions itself as an initial effort toward understanding consumption of performing arts events by consumer experts. Further research on this intriguing topic could facilitate better understanding of not only how consumer experts relate to performing arts

events, but also in handing down the cultural assets of a society to forthcoming generations.

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